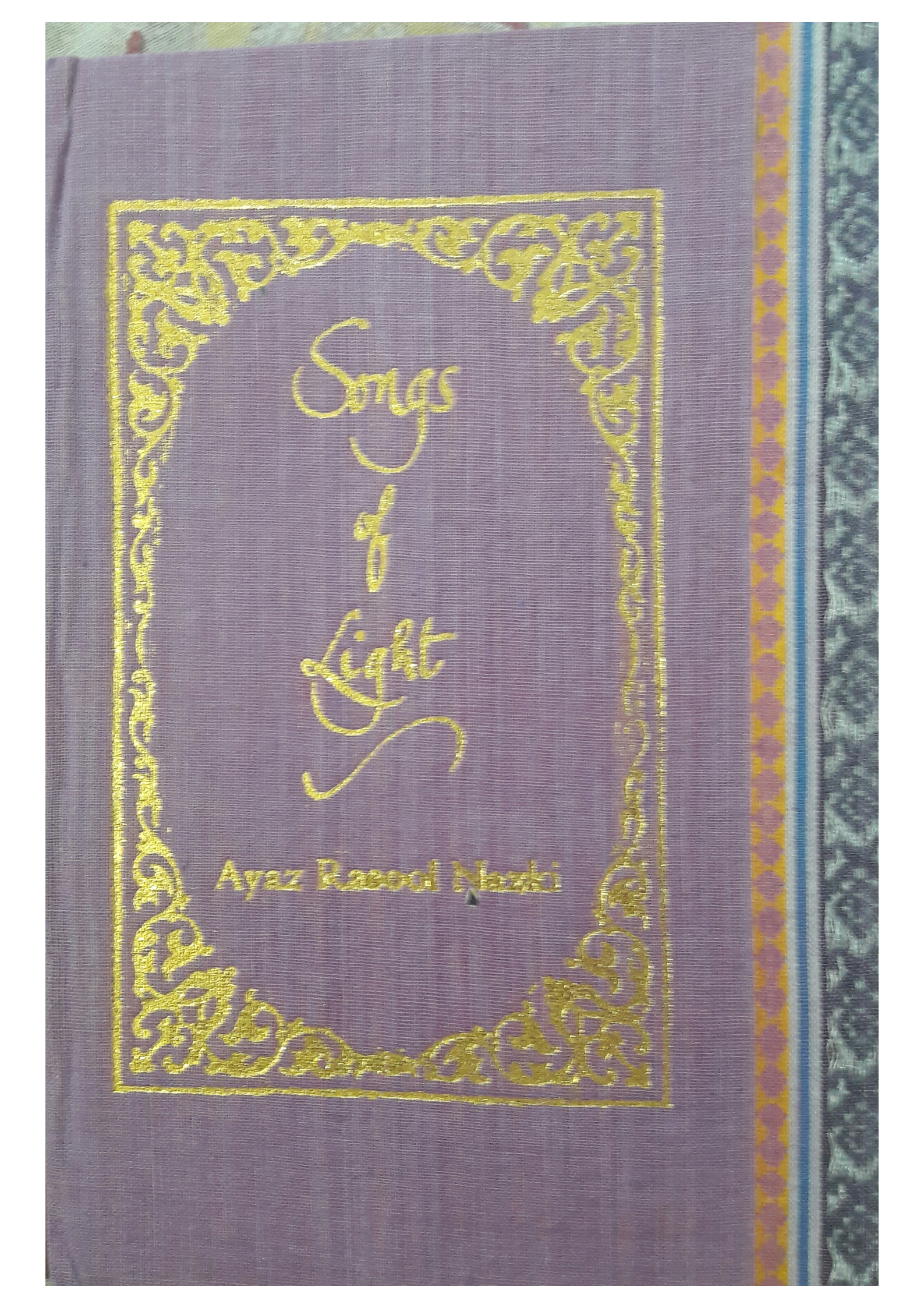


The image shows the front cover of a book. The cover is a deep purple color with a fine, woven texture. A wide, ornate border in gold thread or paint frames the central text area. This border features intricate, symmetrical floral and scrollwork designs at the corners and along the sides. The title 'Songs of Light' is written in a large, elegant, cursive script in gold. Below the title, the author's name 'Ayaz Rasool Nazki' is printed in a smaller, simpler, gold-colored font. To the right of the main purple cover, a sliver of the book's spine is visible, showing a different pattern of repeating gold and red circular motifs on a dark background.

Songs of Light

Ayaz Rasool Nazki



SONGS OF LIGHT

Ayaz Rasool Nazki



Babybird ~ children's books
Blackbird ~ serious comics
Bluebird ~ drama
Greenbird ~ fiction
Greybird ~ reference
Gurubird ~ educational texts
Indi-bird ~ regional language versions
Mini-bird ~ small-size classics
Neobird ~ experimentalia
Redbird ~ poetry
Saffronbird ~ transcreation
Silverbird ~ screenplays



Two birds sit
on the golden bough
of the pippala tree.
One eats
the sweet fruit.
The other watches.
Both are happy.
One is happier.
Which?

Svetāśvatara
Upaniṣad IV : 6

A Writers Workshop Redbird Book

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SONGS OF LIGHT

Ayaz Rasool Nazki





The Author



Professor Ayaz Rasool Nazki, who comes from a family of scholars and poets, was trained as a biological scientist and taught science all his professional life. He has written both poetry and prose in Kashmiri and Urdu, and has published a number of volumes of poetry in these languages.

Ayaz translated a selection of his father, the legendary poet-scholar Mir Ghulam Rasool Nazki's classic Kashmiri *rubayiaat* or quatrains, into English and published them as *Echo*.

Songs of Light is his first collection of English poems. He has also written a novel, which is in the final stages of production.

Both in his poetry and prose, Ayaz essentially represents Kashmir, its ethos, its pain, its past, present and future. The poems in this volume also provide a glimpse into the mind of an artist totally wedded to his land and the consciousness that it represents.

Ayaz is presently serving as Regional Director at Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in Srinagar, Kashmir.

Dedication

While I sang the songs of light, they blinded all my eyes.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my four-decades-old first listener of whatever I wrote, for the patience in tolerating not only me but my verses too: my wife Tasneem.

I owe it to my children Aliya, Shireen, Haris, Manshoor and Isaiah for providing the emotional backup to my being which makes it possible and worthwhile to write.

My brother Mr Farooq Nazki continues to be the lighthouse for all my literary voyages across oceans.

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Foreword

Ayaz Rasool Nazki is an established poet in Kashmiri and Urdu literature. His collection of English poems *Songs of Light* is an extension of his poetic sensibilities and the intention seems to be to reach a wider readership.

Like all of us, Ayaz Rasool Nazki has witnessed the dark times of our history and for relief he looks out to nature and takes refuge in its multiple moods. The child-like innocence returns to him and nature becomes his companion. The birds, meadows, mountains, flowers, trees and everything else in nature attract him. He observes nature keenly and many times becomes like a mystic. Then silence prevails upon him. But he cannot forget the harsh realities of his times and brooding upon them he becomes somewhat melancholic.

They came
and put the landscape on fire
the tulips
of multitude of colours
a thousand hues
and then they withered
ash to ash
colour to colourless

The poet, however, overcomes his melancholic feelings and with the optimism of the soul, he stands up and says:

I will sing light
in this dark night
words of rays
will pierce the air
and sentences
will light up the sky.

The poems of this collection have been written between 'the wisdom of knowing' and 'the history of witnessing.' "Uptown Kashmir"

and "Downtown Kashmir" are two such poems where the times old and now have been beautifully summed up. These two poems also refer to the change in the quality of life in Kashmir. They say a lot in the minimum of words. The comparison is worth notice:

Uptown Kashmir

Glass windows
for the blind

high ceilings
for the dwarf

wide roads
for closed minds

huge mansions
for small men

Downtown Kashmir

They had
latticed windows
they had
vision
they had
low ceilings
they had
heart

they had
narrow lanes

they had
open minds

The poet is a loner and walks alone. Watching from his window little children having a splash in the midday heat, a prayer awakens in him and the words sum up his prayerfulness in this way:

this generation
and the next and next

let them have their childhood
oh Lord!

He is conscious of his identity and the crisis around. He says:

I am not writing
any poem today
I am in the
valley of Kashmir.

The crisis of his identity is evoked through the imagery of nature that sometimes becomes his political statement:

Birds were told
of the sanctions
the no-fly zone
but birds have feathers and wings
they are not Teflon coated
radar guided
they fly anywhere
in any direction
like the drones
but birds bring peace
where no no-fly zones are required.

The poet is conscious of his political predicament and consciously avoids mention of it but even then he hints towards it:

Yet again
the same question
and yet again
the same reply
no reply

Ayaz Rasool Nazki looks altogether different in his English poems. He is not direct or aggressive. He blends his emotions with thoughtfulness and leaves the reader thinking. The real journey of these poems starts from there. In the poem "New Year", he views life in its entirety. The beauty of its shortness with its dreams and hopes and illusions come together in this poem not to mourn but to celebrate. Even in the melancholic times he does not hesitate to dance:

to the rustle of dresses
to the paint on lips

to the scents in the room
 to the looks
 of amorous night
 to the sacredness of souls ...
 ... to the sprout of buds.

Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri American poet known for his book *The Country without a Post Office* finds the best tribute in his poems. In all the nine poems for the departed poet, he spins the thread of wisdom and the readers are calmed down in the end even though

a depression there in the far-off lands
 in some bay or over an ocean
 brings a disturbance
 and destroys homes.

These poems are no doubt personal but they go beyond the person and become representative poems of our times:

The village has lost its count
 of the sheep gone away
 the wolf has befriended the shepherd
 and the eagle is in love with the chick.

The poet might have learnt many lessons in life but the one lesson he holds close to himself is to see beyond the ordinary and mundane. That being the reason, he believes:

a drop holds
 oceans
 in the unseen
 a grain
 hides deserts
 in its chest ...

To conclude I would say Ayaz Rasool Nazki sees life and his times from many windows. His sensibilities are not blindfolded. He travels in the vastness of nature and calls himself "a greedy old man". Yes, I endorse that. He certainly is a greedy old man seeking nothing but poems.



I have been writing poetry for a long time now, but mostly in Urdu and Kashmiri. Many years ago, I attempted a translation/transcreation of a selection of my father's Kashmiri quatrains or *rubais* and published them in a volume titled *Echo*, which was well received. Perhaps that was an encouragement and reinforced my belief in my little ability to compose poetry in English. A small selection of what little I have been writing over the last few years is presented here.

I don't know how important this collection will be as an addition to English poetry, but I hope it will count as an addition to English poetry written in Kashmir. Many Kashmiris have over the years extended their expression into English poetry and created some beautiful works. I shall of course always essentially remain a poet who writes in his own mother tongue, Kashmiri, and then also in the language of our ethos and culture, Urdu.

The fundamental question that every poet grapples with is essentially existential, and the forms the answers take — whispers of love in a beloved's ear, shouts of frustration and despair — are all attempts to understand, imagine and express the nuances of creation. Why did God create this universe? "I was a hidden treasure and I wished to be found out".

There is a little something of God in all of us, a little bit more in those who struggle with the creative impulse. All writers want to be read. And that's the long and short of it.

As in my Kashmiri and Urdu poetry, Kashmir breathes into every word that I write in English too. Kashmir has become an obsession and sometimes a limitation for most Kashmiri poets/writers. It leaves us with no space to think of anything else. The despair, hopelessness and violence that have afflicted Kashmir naturally inform all our creative endeavours. It is almost as if the political and military wounds inflicted upon it have caused a permanent disability. There must

be a world beyond and in spite of Kashmir but our blinded and blindfolded eyes cannot see it. We love it and shall continue to sing it, and hopefully sing it into a new dawn someday. The day when we throw off our fetters, tear open our blindfolds, and sing to the whole world, of deliverance, hope, peace and beauty.

This small collection comes to you through WRITERS WORKSHOP. I am indebted to this iconic institution and Prof. Ananda Lal for agreeing to publish it.

Rinku Kaul helped me in composing the computer copy as he has been doing for most of my publications. I am grateful to him.

My friend and eminent author Maharaj Krishan Santoshi wrote a wonderful foreword and in fact almost flattered me into publishing this book.

Now it is between these poems and you, the reader. I withdraw and watch the encounter.

Srinagar

A. R. N.

11 August 2016

I wonder

I wonder
what has this ceiling fan
to do in this dark and cold night
day after day night after night
hanging still and waiting
never knowing the cycle of seasons
the advent of warm winds from distant lands
the gathering storms, the turbulence
and the moment of its truth
the gentle push on a switch

The man with the lantern

The man with the lantern
turned the corner
lantern dangling
under his cloak
that was the last
anyone saw of him
in that dark night

They came

They came
and put the landscape on fire
the tulips
of multitude of colours
a thousand hues
and then they withered
ash to ash
colour to colourless

Birds were told

Birds were told
of the sanctions
the no-fly zone
but birds have feathers and wings
they are not Teflon coated
radar guided
they fly anywhere
in any direction
like the drones
but birds bring peace
where no no-fly zones are required.

Will it so happen

Will it so happen
that even after I am gone
the sun will rise as before
and also set as before
the breeze will move over the hills
the cloud will bring refreshing rains
the meadow will turn emerald green
upon the advent of spring
and wear a cloak of white
during winter time
is it so and will it so happen
that birds will chirp
butterflies dance
and lilies sprout
roses bloom
and little children play
hide and seek in the yard
even after I am gone?

One day

One day
I will also retire
to the hermitage
by the stream
and count beads
with shaking fingers
and aching bones

All warriors are back



All warriors are back
safe and un-bruised
into the waiting arms
of a night's sleep
until another battle
on the morrow
over the hill

Silence has become eloquence

Silence has become eloquence
stones have numerous lips
sounds dance upon the sands
tranquillity rules the seas
passion is no language
spoken is eternal loss
un-spoken lies the treasure
deep inside the cave

I will sing light

I will sing light
in this dark night
words of rays
will pierce the air
and sentences
will light up the sky
I will sing light
in this dark night
and all the mermaids will see
and hear my song
rise up on the surface
and the ocean will sing
and all the gazelles in the desert
will see my song on the sparkling sand
and run around the dunes
singing Ghalib
to the doe-eyed dames
in their silken robes
and emerald headgears
I will sing light
in this dark night
and bear the consequences
of my dreams.

She looks the same

She looks the same
decades upon decades
have not changed any of her looks
I went to escort her home
one last time from her work
as I escorted her the first time
she went to work
nothing has changed in her poise
nothing has changed in the way she walks
nothing has changed in the way she talks
nothing has changed in the way my heart
leaps at a look on her face
nothing has changed in the way my soul
lights up at a touch of her hand.

The doctor said



The doctor said:
You are fit for your age.

A Poem for My Wife



Time is a funny thing
running away
all the time
crossing meadows
jumping seas
desert and the woods
stopping never
in your tracks
waiting upon
none at all
I have chased it
day and night
over the hills
and under the seas
above the cloud
and within my fist
the sand slips
and water seeps
into the ground
the seed sprouts
and the bark.

Dry and shrivelled
comes to life
the brook sings
over the pebbles
the bird picks
a note in the beak
time is funny
running away

into the void
the spaces remain
within my heart
time doesn't
fill them though.

When I turn

When I turn
he runs away
this goes on and on
it is either him
or me
in the mirror.
I know for sure
he lives in there
within a vastness
within the expanse
a universe
within the frame
but on cue
all is held back
hidden behind
nothingness
an emptiness
a void
to hold me in
to flatter my ego.

On my morning walk today

On my morning walk today
I met a bird
he said nothing
but flew with me
keeping pace
with my walk
all the way
from Centaur
to the hill
overlooking
the lake
there in the woods
he took the flight
up above the trees
leaving me
there waving my arm in thin air.

Leaping flames every night rise up from my bed

Leaping flames every night rise up from my bed
touch the timber on the ceiling
knock at the wooden roof
and then retract onto their roots
enter my quilt and saunter into my dreams

That bird will come back

That bird will come back
I have been told
his nest is warm
his chicks are cold
he has to cross
the sky on fire
leaping flames
kiss his feather
sing his plume
his wings mighty jets, up there
plough on, digging up the air
fire everywhere

Green and cold the morning air

Green and cold the morning air
hill is listless, lake is dumb
birds have taken to wing
on way back to summer lands
tourists in their furry caps
and long coats

I Am Walking Alone

Poets have disappeared
into the meadows
and melted into the clouds
over the high hills
no songs will now ever
reverberate in the valleys

Yet again

Yet again
the same question
and yet again
the same reply
no reply

Vigil



little children
from the village
come to the *mawas*
for a splash in the midday heat
their little fair limbs
beat the waves
jumping up and going down
joys of childhood!
I watch from my window
and pray for this generation
and the next and next
let them have their childhood
oh Lord!
I sense a moment
over my shoulder
there he stands
looking ahead
above my head
across the *mawas*
into the woods
over the mountain
keeping a vigil
for the bears
that roam around
and waylay little children
of the village

mawas: the poet lives by the stream known as Lakshmi Mawas in Srinagar

And he came

And he came
 he promised
 he will come again
 another day
 and then he will
 share his wisdom
 on the issues
 I had raised
 I waited all day
 and the night
 watching the lane
 between the willows
 on either side
 roses over the hedge
 and off course
 the *mawas*
 winding down
 along the lane
 I spread the piece of
 freshly woven
 carpet on the steps
 for his feet to touch
 I cooked the rice
 in the earthen pot
 over the hearth of
 mud freshly laid
 I cooked the *bakh*
 green with chillies
 I put the yogurt
 in his cup

and then
he came
not galloping on a steed
not being driven in a chariot
pulled by a score of horses
yet he came
descending like the rain
drop by drop and torrent by torrent
drenching the soil
in my lawn
seeding it with divine shrubs
the *mali* said "Sir! this
turf is unknown here,
where from did you import this?"

The rice in the earthen bowl
the fresh yogurt in the cup
and the green *bakh*
I fed him with my hand.

bakh: spring greens, essential part of routine Kashmiri food, a vegetable served
with boiled rice
mali: gardener

Visitor



A cloud appeared above my head
thunder blew under my feet
lightning struck around my chest
amid a deafening downpour
someone called me by some name
and before I could reply
the door opened
and there he was
all drenched and soaked in rain
water dripping in torrents
from his brow
I touched his face
held his hands
touched his feet
they were dry
warm and supple
like that of the baby
Isaiah my grandson
his eyes shone
like diamonds
his brow with brilliance
radiated light
we sat there
through the night
I sang to him
my clumsy poems
and he laughed
and laughed
a hearty laugh
it reverberated

in the mountains
and rose up
into the skies.

Sand and Mountain



Sand is
treacherous
slips between the fingers
shifts under the feet
never trust sand
and make castles
never draw
dreams over
this page
either on the
river bank
or in the expanse
of a desert.

But the mountain speaks
the word of the Lord
in the blowing wind
in the rustle of leaves
it speaks to me
of the distant stars
it speaks to me
of departed souls
it speaks to me
of the muse
sitting on a moonlit night
on the bank of the *mawas*
composing hymns to the Lord
and odes to the pretty dame
carrying a bale of hay
on her rounded head

and dancing with each step
a new dance
a new mudra
the mountain keeps
my company
through the night.

With the first light
it falls silent
it watches
the world go by
keeping to itself
so do I.

I Know



It was a dream
like real
in the foot of Mahadev
I stood alone
watching the paddy fields
green and sparkling
then they came
a few men wearing robes
looking around
moving about
searching for something
and then they said
"She has chosen
the blessed spot,
here she will make her camp."
A rectangular piece of land
was then marked.
I stood in awe
not knowing
what was on, till eternity seemed to pass
and then someone came to me,
"Look sir, she will only listen to you,
how can she spend the night in the open,
unprotected? will you then plead with her
to give up this thought?"
I did go with them
there she was
a dazzling moon
bedecked bride
loveliest of fairies

in her best
descended from heavens
ethereal and pure.
I did entreat her
on behalf of the men,
but she was in no mood to oblige,
till at last I offered her my little hut
on the stream
and she agreed
to perform her night-long puja
there instead ...
Who was she?
I asked the men, the devotees with her ...
Did they say?
Only I know.

But you say ...

But you say ...
mountain is a mountain
how can it be a friend
how can it share your thoughts
but you say, it talks to you
calls you aloud
and in whispers in the dead of night
when world sleeps
tells of times past
of kings and queens
of sages and hermits
of wars and love
of passion and intrigue ...
mountain is a mountain.
Ask any geologist
he will tell you
its worth
of rocks and granite
of minerals and ore
of water and gold
all things in its bosom
but
the wisdom
of knowing
but the history
of witnessing ...
but you say ...

Adieu

Time has come
to pick up things
scattered on the floor
put them into a bag
shut the window
on the stream
lock the door
move out
and drive away
leaving behind
a cloud of dust
and little children
bathing in the stream
women with baskets of dung
on their heads
gossiping men on the corner
under the tree
and chirping birds
on the bark

Uptown Kashmir

Glass windows
for the blind

high ceilings
for the dwarf

wide roads
for closed minds

huge mansions
for small men

Downtown Kashmir



They had
latticed windows
they had
vision
they had
low ceilings
they had
heart

they had
narrow lanes

they had
open minds

K Is Poetry

I am not writing
any poem today
I am in the
valley of Kashmir.

I am

I am
looking
deep inwards
I close my eyes
my ears are opened
plugging them
I see a vast expanse
of black light
glistening
shimmering
not allowing
a ray of white light
to come in
through any slit in the door
any chink in the window.

The vast expanse
of dark luminescence
grows brighter
and brighter
till at last
my senses
cannot take
any more
about to break
I hold on to the latch
tight and firm.

Then there inside
the chaste pure womb

of nothingness
a black-blue spot
takes shape
it expands
it spreads
it takes an orange hue
till at last
I am no more
in my body
in my soul
I am when
I am not

Lines in the Palm

The lines on the palm
of my hand
said nothing,
I asked them
on every turn on the road
right or left?
And now
when I have
reached the mountain peak
and am to touch the sky
with my hand
the lines in the palm
speak to me
“We knew all along the way—
you didn’t ask.”

It Doesn't Care



It doesn't care
it comes in
of its own accord
in the dead of night
in the scorching sun
never knocking at the door
there it is,
behind the curtain
stretched across
the white floor,
there on the shelf
hiding in the closet
winking through the mirror,
rocking in the chair
fiddling with the books,
rummaging through the drawers
switching on the lights
playing with the paperweight
round and round
on the table top
humming under the breath
till it descends through
my pen.

Enlightenment



I closed my eyes
looked inwards
it was dark
unblemished darkness
no spot
no crevice
black
uninterrupted

Sea of Darkness



Void
 deep
 no contours
 no edges
 no angles
 only
 depth
 deep
 deep
 only
 extent
 void and wide.

I opened my eyes
 light
 rays upon rays
 kissing the window panes
 touching the carpet
 and spreading around
 enclosing my frame
 my hallowed being
 like a *devta*
 on the calendar
 emitting light
 but not a ray
 entering me
 my darkness
 virgin chaste pure
 a fairy maiden
 awaiting union.

devta: god

Lessons of Life

He taught me to see beyond
the ordinary and mundane
a ray holds galaxies
teeming with suns
a drop holds
oceans
in the unseen
a grain
hides deserts
in its chest
he taught me
so many things
I the keen learner
intense listener
walked the ropes
I learnt all
he taught me
what I did not,
he never said,
that galaxies
shrink into rays
that seas
wind up into drops
and deserts
roll back into grains

When Rain Comes



Fragrances dissolve in air
spread around in the garden
go out into the street
they cannot change
the politics of the place
bees set out with the first light
in search of flowers in the meadow
collecting nectar in their tiny frames
and the queen sits all day
doing nothing
that is how it is,
again I digress
my thoughts wander away
in search of a meadow
full with flowers
I am no bee
I am no bird
I am no tree
do not nest on my branch
do not sit under my wing
when the rain comes

My Poems



My poems are not mine
they come to me from the void
I am a greedy old man

Words Won't Listen



Why do you descend upon me
in this dark and lonely night
when not a soul stirs
when not a leaf moves
when not a bird chirps
when not a bee hums
this oppressive silence
knots within my chest
and yet you choose to torment me
you with your tiny wings
flutter around my open eyes
you with your pointed beaks
scratch my scalp
you with your rounded limbs
nudge me on
words! Tonight I can't write
why don't you, once in a while,
leave me alone?
But I know
words won't listen

Flood Gates

Flood gates
there was a whiff
a sigh or a whisper,
there was something
in the evening air,
that hit me hard
and knocked my senses out.
I had over the eons
believed that it was over,
it was past and it was gone,
the nagging pain in my heart
the aching in my chest
it was gone.
Life had moved on
the birds had taken to flight
and gone over the firmament
into unknown lands
seeds had been sown over and over again,
crops had ripened and come under the sickle
again and again
seasons had come in a long chain
of light and shade, of heat and cold.
I had settled to my chores
I had adjusted to my life
all had finally turned out well
but the wind that blew a million times
blew a different shade today,
the light that shone a thousand days
sparkled a different ray today,

somewhere deep in the bosom
a lock was unlocked
and the doors were flung open
the flood gates came crashing
sinking the last of my boats
and tossing me away
into the tempest
away from shores.

River of Silence



Come and sit beside me
on the cushion of soft sand
on the bank of this river,
the river of silence
the invisible tides
are fuming and fretting
with rage
tossing their heads on rocks
and crushing the hapless fish
between the rolling stones
I can see this all
within the confines of solitude
come and share all my dreams
all my visions
in the dark.

Light is my friend,
absence of darkness
and voices,
are a digression
in silence;
pebbles thrown by a
naughty child
on the placid water's face,
ripples do not last that long
ripples are not there to stay
with each succeeding ripple
its strength wanes
till it finally dies down
and the calm is restored.

Me



Some water will mingle with water
some air will disperse with the air
and some as soil will mix with soil
what is left only God knows
what is left is unknown,
a whiff of smoke will rise up
that too will be lost in space,
an earthen lamp on the stand all alone
in the middle of a room awaits
someone who will
feed it oil afresh,
spruce up its worn-out wick
and show it a lighted matchstick.

I Don't Know

If this is fidelity
if this is faith
if this is love
but the fact is
year after year
in this month
at its end
a few tiny bulges appear
on a weak slender stem
and that sets my heart racing
every morning
every evening
I watch it grow
till at last
there it is
the narcissus
in my lawn
away from that
fragrant verdant vale

New Year



The year will
die tonight
and a new one
will come and take its place
this has been
and this shall be
ever and ever
into eternity
and into time.

But I shall not be
always there
to light candles
and break into applause
on the stroke of midnight
no one shall be.

We are allotted
only a few midnights
and few candles
and few fireworks.

We are strange
we know all
but we pretend
we know not
every minute
every day
we wither away
the decay is in
our genes

in the programme
and then a moment
we cease to be
going away
as if a whisper
between the leaves
as if
a bubble with the rain.

Let us party tonight
wear our caps
pointed up
into the sky
let us pretend
we are immortal
never to die
never to decay
till the lights are on
till the stroke of midnight
let us dance
to the beat of time
to the wink of stars
and to the whiff of leaves.

Let us dance
to the rustle of dresses
to the paint on lips
to the scents in the room
to the looks
of amorous night

to the sacredness of souls
let us drink
to the tears of
children
sweat of men and
the blood of women.

Let us sing
to the sprout of buds
to the golden wheat
to the lustre of corn
to the milk
to the honey
and to the nectar.

To the bees
and to the birds.

Till midnight
the stroke of twelve.

Nostradamus

I wasn't awake
I wasn't asleep as well
my senses dull
but my mind ran
over the hills
galloping wild
in that meadow
over that ridge
within the valley
along the river.

Spring came
and went away
autumn came
and went away
and with snow
all around
the king arrived
and rode in his royal carriage
the streams rolled a silver carpet
the springs shot up fireworks
into the sky.

I saw the trees
being reborn from old wombs
in the earth
I saw the wind acting
a midwife and the breeze a kind nurse
I wasn't awake
I wasn't asleep either

through that night
when stars were born
and moons were lit.
A sun was torn from a heap of suns
in the night of heaven
the day was placed
and I was given
the golden key
to open the gate
and let the angels out.

Into the backyard
entered the leopards and took away
the little pups
and their mother
roamed around
seeking her kids.

I was the Nostradamus of your age
I saw it happen
before my time
and so was blinded
by the sight
and put into the well
for thieves to come
and rescue the boy.

Whose father had
blinded himself
and smelt his sweat

and heard his blood
on a worn-out shroud.

They made a mistake
they forgot about me
I wasn't awake
I wasn't asleep either.

It Was Her



Fragrances are always deceptive
travelling over spaces
and marching over time.

I know she wasn't around
how could she in that din,
in that traffic,
soot and smoke,
dust and grime.

How could she
ever be there
but ask my senses
it was her, it was her.

With a gush of wind
with a whiff of air
with a draught from the sea
her fragrance came
and entered my being.

On Way to Mumbai



He seemed to me
a simple man
obedient to the will of God
with a long beard and
sporting a skull cap
at peace with the world.

I saw him mumbling
a string of beads
an offering to his God
I saw him kneel in prayer
five times a day.

I talked to him of life
he talked to me of death
of all his acquaintances
whom he had met
at the hospital in Mumbai
five years ago and how
only his wife survived
the onslaught of cancer
and how all this was by
the grace of God that
fifth year in a row
her tests were good.

We said goodbye
at Bandra terminus
be it then that sixth year
and seventh and on and on

his wife lives and his faith
outlives him and his God
and his mercy outlives all.

Masterpiece

Today I must
write a masterpiece
an offering to
divine Saraswati
who like a magical swan
swims on the sandy river
of muse and rhyme
but what should I write
and how should I write
for the former nothing is known
and for the latter I have no pen.

But a masterpiece I must write
even with no sense and
even with no pen
sense is the virtue of the fools
and pens are flaunted by the illiterate.

Tonight



Tonight I am my own friend
come to see me after a long time
together we shall sit on the terrace
in the moonlit night
drink to the stars up in the sky
recollect the old childhood friends
and re-say all those boyish jokes
and laugh our hearts out.

Tonight we shall hand in hand
descend the meadow
and ascend the hill
bask in the sun and
laze around
on the turf of past
collect pebbles and toss them up
run after the rabbits in the woods
make a snare with
a strand of horse's hair
and lay a trap for little birds.

Tonight my bosom friend and I
shall see each other
in the mirror of time
leafing through the dusty books
reading aloud the poems
and singing the songs
that we never wrote.

River Bank Opera



It is good to
go and sit on the river bank
and throw pebbles into the water
create a ripple for a fleeting second
and watch it dissolve with the tide.

The early morning rays of the sun
play a dance on the bank
and enact an opera
on the stage of sand
the trees dotting the edge
watch in silence
and record the moves
on their leaves for posterity.

The divine play
plays itself out
every morning
on the river bank
but oblivious to this and all
the river flows
keeping its course
never knowing where to go.

But I have a date with time
an engagement foretold
written in a huge book
the book of accounts
the book of actions
and I must go.

Selfish Birds



Birds are selfish,
they descend onto my lawn
when I offer them
crumbs of bread,
no sooner they pick
the last speck,
they fly off
hovering above
lawns and homes
searching for crumbs.

Men are fools
offering their palms
to the beaks of
hungry birds.

The scratch on the soul,
the indelible mark,
the timeless burden,
the gnash in the heart.

The empty lawn,
the green desert
and the sand of grass,
let them not descend
onto my lawn
I too have spent
the last of crumbs.

Random Thoughts

Let us meet somewhere,
it has been ages since
we sat on the steps
of the ghat and watched boats
ferry across loads of men,
women and children
all on their way to somewhere.

If we make it today
to the same ghat
let us enquire from the waves
and ripples on the water
about all those men,
women and children
who had crossed the span;
what happened then?
who met whom and who came home?

It has been ages,
generations have come
and generations have gone
a thousand suns have risen and sunk
into the water in front of me.

A lonely, dull moon hangs there
outside my window,
the chill in the air cuts a sinew,
I am frozen to the core,
my friend has sent me a note

on Facebook
in an alien tongue
which I can't read.

People are the same
making families
raising children
building homes
opening accounts in
the nearest banks.

My papers lie on the table
the tax return, the unpaid bills
the medical insurance
and my will
yet unwritten.

Fareed Parbati's Pen

Fareed too has gone away,
in search of what?
he only knows
he didn't see me
before he left
I would ask him
of unknown destination
the journey at hand.

He was a tall man
handsome, robust
full of energy
the energy he put
into his prolific pen.

And the pen
did he take it with him
I need to know
for if his pen remains
on this side of the mirror
he will return,
with the coming spring.

And unravel the mystery,
mystery of the *rubai*,
Sarmad's *rubai*
and Khayyam's *rubai*
the fifth hemistich,
the unwritten muse,
the unthought thought,

the unsaid word,
the unsung song.

I shall wait for him to come
for he has left his pen behind.

All Day Long

(My Poems for Shahid Ali)



The spider built a lovely web,
from this wall to that wall and
from this corner to that edge
laying silken threads, then
crossing them with more threads,
until at last a fine masterpiece was woven.

Then the master craftsman
took in the view and felt good
the time to relax
and sit back had finally come.

So he slid himself between the threads
and drifted into a deep slumber.

Wind is like death
it keeps no calendar;
a depression there in the far-off lands
in some bay or over an ocean
brings a disturbance
and destroys homes.

Spiders have nothing to fear
they have no business with the ocean,
its rising tides or ebbing waves.

But then spiders are funny creatures
building webs
and getting enmeshed between the lines.

Come let us collect the pebbles



Come let us collect the pebbles
on the shore of this river
and build a mansion
with glass windows and latticed screens
hang all the trophies
we won in the school
on the walls and
spread childhood dreams on the floors
and search for the 81 squares in the
sudoku game.

Nine, all the nine on every side, column and row
nine, and all the nine in every square up and down,
but then the ill-clad sages in the ancient times
in deep woods and upon the hills
found the zero.

What would we do without a zero?
Our sudoku will not do
for it has no place for a zero,
the multiplication tables
have to be memorized afresh.

Come let us count the pebbles
on the shore of this river
and make an inventory of our dreams.

Again it is a Friday

Again it is a Friday and the muezzin has called
the faithful to prayer,
I must hurry lest I miss the mercy of my Lord,
up above the world so high,
like a diamond in the sky,
but no wait a bit
that would be blasphemous but,
the nursery rhymes are for kids
and kids have nothing to do with God,
only adults commit sins and need mercy,
I am digressing yet again,
the prayer is at hand,
all lined up sinful souls in bright clothes
straight up then they kneel
then they bow then they ask
with choked voices and misty eyes
Oh! Lord the merciful the beneficent
have pity on our souls and rest us in eternal peace

Little dewdrop on the blade of grass

Little dewdrop on the blade of grass
a little diamond on the file,
a ray from the sun piercing through,
dancing colours, the rainbow of life.

He was away all day,
his little girl all alone,
waited, waited for him to return
but the shadows lengthened and the time shrank
like a new garment
in a washing machine
the speed control having gone bust.

They fished out yet another body from the river
they buried yet another bundle of bones.

Stars are funny, twinkle in the sky
winking at the mortals below.

And the sun having retired for the night
conspiracies hatch in the dark
chickens have finally come to roost.

The village has lost its count
of the sheep gone away
the wolf has befriended the shepherd
and the eagle is in love with the chick.

Last year's corn is still there
hands of harvest have been broken

the sickles have been taken away
the trial is about to begin afresh
all the accused have been killed
justice has always taken its course.

Nightingales and house sparrows and the doves
in droves landed on my lawn
where this year too narcissus is about to come
and await the *bombur*
black blackish blue
humming an amorous song.

bombur: bumble bee

In a jiffy I went across

In a jiffy I went across
all the heavens and the earth
beyond the void into a void
there with golden bars built a cage
for my heavenly bird
but alas! Unfasten the door
the bird flew off
and saw a huge fire upon the ground
a necklace of pearls
an iron cage and a clever crow
in search of life feigning death
saved himself
I was left stranded on the shore of
nothingness void deep and dense
in every sinew and around
the fire! The fire! People shouted
but no one cared

It wasn't easy in the beginning

It wasn't easy in the beginning,
but by and by and one by one
wounds healed and sores repaired
strange, today no one remembers
the lion who mauled the simple folk,
the village was then as of now,
close to the woods
and lions and bears, foxes and jackals,
roamed around as human beings,
never touching any for prey.

But then something happened
and a lion became the man-eater
and wrought havoc on the village.

But this is not in the novel
Lord of the Rings
or *Rambo* for that matter
Alif Laila, *The Thousand Nights*
baker's shop and the workshop
the storytellers' books
all were burnt in the oven
the flame from orchard wood
doesn't soot the face
and is mild on the eyes.

I know you will come
and put the record straight
and write the linkings
in the tale but when?

no one in the village knows!
all young boys have been away,
while women collect the firewood and
little girls with ponytails play with daffodils
on the green,
little boys with rosy cheeks play in mud.

King is here, salute the king
present the thief and
tie him up, let us collect the wild strawberries
for fun.

I know as the lines on my palm
that you are here in the hay stack
with the blue eyes and rosy cheek, little girl
but a needle I can't find.

I do not know

I do not know,
but for sure,
someone has been,
opening the window
and letting the sun in.

The moss on the carpet
shrunk and shrivelled
has dried up,
a feather freshly shed
by a pigeon lies here
for sure someone
has been in.

The autumn leaves
whisper again
but never take your name
the lazy brook passing by
looks like a serpent
awaiting his prey.

Yet I know you are around
but where? I do not know.

Agha Shahid Ali



Agha Shahid Ali
my bosom friend,
I never saw
but often met,
as part of me,
for I too belong to
The Country without a Post Office
and part of *Half-inch Himalayas*
is also mine.
Agha Shahid Ali and I
were of same age
but he grew faster than me,
he knew all along
that when snow
on the lofty peaks melted
and apple blossoms overtook the scene,
he had a rendezvous
with death and
Agha Shahid Ali and
his illustrious ancestor
rode a beautiful steed
and traversed the endless
meadows of time,
on the way to Kashmir.

The murderer was sheathed

The murderer was sheathed
within the sword.
And he rode a purebred steed,
galloping into the endless desert
of yesterday.

Pigeons had hardened their wings,
the long marathon flight
above the endless ocean
had at last commenced.

And there through the latticed windows
of the Dargah
hundred pairs of eyes watched
the congregation getting restive
but nothing happened
no one moved
not a word was ever said.

Through the Day



Through the day I thought of you,
in the wilderness of my mind,
I created many an oasis
and imagined trees with branches of ivory
and in them, nests woven in golden thread
birds of silver rested there
laying eggs of emerald green.

All day long I thought of you
in the vast desert of my soul
gushing springs roaming around
planting handfuls of life into the sand.

All day long I thought of you,
on the lofty mountain of time,
step by step, rock by rock
ascending the heights.

Echoing Shamas Faqir

Shamas Faqir was a mystic poet of Kashmir, who lived in the 19th century.
He has been described as a prince of Kashmiri Sufi poetry.

Shunyah



Beyond the nothingness
was my nest
the fire of love burnt it down
a swinging cradle with chimes was hung
fully filled
hearing the jingling I stepped in.
Within the totality I enjoyed the stroll in the garden
I was shown the flower in full bloom
the unknown in a moment called out to me
began to profess his love.
The guide told me a while ago
the world is a crow wedding party
joined me with the wind
and showed me the special and routine.
Saw mountains and hills on fire
spotted water in a stream
the green turf hid the snare, the net
I was enmeshed, my friend.
The crow went with the news to the owl
the happy one has been trapped
if you see him you will know
the road to there is slippery.
Hearing this the owl bowed his head down
he lost his own being.
The crow came with this to the *razhoonz*
how much ruckus did he raise.
Trapped I was in a daze
in reality was I wise
ignoring real went for apparent
material has to destroy.

I was the king over the heights
 fate plunged me down
 black *surma* put into my eyes
 the enemy turned upon me.
 I had a look from my height
 and lost the one pearl I had
 the friend burnt my pearl string to ash
 I shook the fire's hand.
 The wine seller gave me a word
 simpleton you be not, you are the boss
 kin and stranger both be same
 expend millions of thousands.
 Reaching that place I saw seven springs
 the spring beyond had the purest of water
 sandalwood forest had Idrees
 grafting undertaken by Ilyaas.
 I sifted the ocean
 the pearl string I brought up to the bank
 there the Khazir said to me
 you will be blinded, stop.
 Shamas Faqir, happening and bearing
 one only knows who suffers
 new and old both are valued
 the shroud be of silk.

razhoonz: rajbans, the swan

surma: kohl

Idrees: Biblical prophet Enoch

Ilyaas: Biblical prophet Elijah or Elias

Khazir: Melchizedek of Genesis?

The most special among specials

Him and his attributes are one
The most special among specials
look for him always, he has no interruptions
The most special among specials.
Sealing all six directions, sixth sense awakens
that nod is for the wise
this is the promise made to me by the
wine seller

The most special among specials.
I burnt the sandalwood
and melted gold
the master put it to touchstone,
in the marketplace it lost faith
The most special among specials.
The fire of love burnt my body
the glare of the sun went into my eyes
exaltation after death
is the life for the seeker
The most special among specials.
Streams issue from the river
river drifts within the drop
this commoners do not know
The most special among specials.

Shamas Faqir! Drink the elixir of eternity
that is the life of perfect ones
may you then be with the pure
The most special among specials.

I have been united with you



Since the moment you burnt me
in the fire of love,
I have been united with you
since the time I heard your word
I have been united with you.

Me, a log of sandalwood
brought down from the woods,
you with love's axe
chopped it into pieces,
the burden of trust
is now on me,
I have been united with you.

Neither a believer nor a non-believer
neither of pedigree nor of high virtue,
you in a jiffy took my heart and faith
from me
I have been united with you.

I sighted you over the Harmokh
in seven curves you the colourful
became visible,
the colourless, I couldn't gather
I have been united with you.

Shamas Faqir entered the black
drinking the elixir of eternity
again and again,
drinking that which was revealed
I have been united with you.

Ghazal



I see everywhere my friend
not a hair breadth without,
come I will tell you the secret of secrets
do not be unattentive.

In a moment it came to me
I heard it under the wings of my heart
care and attention are preferred
for up, the down is also pride.

You dive into the unity
you will find the king
if alive you be, alive you die
go on playing as a child.

The sea is deeper than the deep
how would blind fathom the vast
not easy to comprehend the meaning
only wise may do.

Tear away the garments of not being
you will know your name
the goblet with wine empty.

In the supplication I saw,
existence and vision disappear
this secret alone remained
and it is not wrapped in drapes.

How do I tell you its worth
even dead the lover lived
you Shamas make this happen
in case you, you seek.

When shall that simpleton see the light?



If you are wise, introspect within:
 When shall that simpleton see the light?
 How do I blame that gardener,
 flower plants were sown
 and nettle has grown
 I watered it and it has bitten me:
 When shall that simpleton see the light?
 Deceiver himself gets deceived,
 for him the noon turns into night.
 What would a pauper light a hearth for:
 When shall that simpleton see the light?
 Don't waste your counsel on Devil's lad,
 consider him to be base at base
 emancipation is not for a dirty core:
 When shall that simpleton see the light?
 The one who jumps into the ocean of love,
 to cleanse his self shall realize
alif, lam and meem
 I would snatch the pearl of realization from his hand:
 When shall that simpleton see the light?
 Shamas the mad seeks the true Lord,
 Allah, let my name live forever.
 To eat away the moon,
 immature ascended the sky:
 When shall that simpleton see the light?

alif, lam, meem: the three Arabic alphabets with which the text of Holy Quran opens

My place is behind the veil of pain

The queen will come out and play the game
my place is behind the veil of pain
why was my heart,
the heart of a simple being enamoured:
My place is behind the veil of pain.

Look at the dust on the book of destiny,
love has put a sheen on beloved's face,
this was embroidered on the tunic of my heart:
My place is behind the veil of pain.

You shall reap in the autumn,
what you sow in the spring.
Meditate and keep on humming,
the lover is scared of
neither heat nor cold:
My place is behind the veil of pain.

What would one know of it,
be he a child or a man grown
who has not suffered the scalding of love,
when to offer his head to someone?
My place is behind the veil of pain.

Shamas Faqir traversed the whole universe
praying to the Lord for eternal life
sitting at home and repeating the word:
My place is behind the veil of pain.

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WRITERS WORKSHOP ~ A Credo by P. Lal

Glory be to Mahakala. It is now 2010. I am four score and two. Time for some home truths. Because WRITERS WORKSHOP has close to 3500 separate titles in its checklist (published over 50 years 1958-2008), and because it has averaged around 100 titles each year since 1995, there is a misconception that it is an Indian publishing leviathan. (No other publisher in India has that many titles on its annual list.) The truth is much less awesome. WRITERS WORKSHOP has no office; it operates from my residence, from the living-room and a multi-purpose bedroom. It has no secretary; my "secretary" is a three-tiered Godrej filing cabinet. It has no editor, no "readers" to inspect, evaluate and OK typescripts; I do all three tasks. It has no proofreader; I perform the nitty-gritty of deleting, accreting and correcting. It has no "assistant" to acknowledge or follow up letters; I do all that too. It has no typewriter; I reply in longhand. (From 2004, kowtowing to the hi-tech convenience, I sometimes seek help from my computer-savvy grand-daughter Shuktara to e-mail replies to insistent and urgent enquiries for WW information.) It has no retail or wholesale distribution "outlet"; there is only a cubby-hole of a kiosk at my residence (8 feet x 4 feet roughly) called the Book Nook, where a dedicated young assistant attends to intermittent sales of WW books. This Lake Gardens kiosk opened in 1998, 40 years after WW's inception. Footing found, it stays put.

How then has WW survived? Without plush foundations to back it, without advertisement, without large-hearted patrons? Initially, by the skin of our teeth (1958-1964). Then (1965-1990) by my visits to hard currency El Dorados, specially Great Britain, the USA and Australia on lecture assignments and visiting professorships on two dozen or so occasions, and pumping the shekels thus earned to keep alive a gasping ideal.

Alternative publishing is desperately needed wherever commercial publication rules. WW is not a professional publishing house. It does not print well-known names; it makes names known and well known, and then leaves them in the loving clutches of the so-called "free" market (which can be and is very cut-throat and very expensive). It is not sad, it is obnoxious, to plead, as publishers do, "I will not publish poetry because it does not sell." Most English book publishing today in boom-time India and outside is book-dumping. There is a nexus between high-profile PR-conscious book publishers, semi-literate booksellers, moribund public and state libraries, poorly informed and nepotistic underlings in charge of book review pages and supplements of most national newspapers and magazines, and biased bulk purchases of near worthless books by bureaucratic institutions set up — believe it or not! — to inform, educate and elevate the reading public. Wonders never cease.

I strongly believe that, instead of catering and pandering to existing lowest-common-denominator popular taste, a self respecting writer should create a literary taste by which he or she may be enjoyed by discriminating readers.

Because WW goes in for serious creative writing, and because there is no satisfactory distribution network for such writing, its terms of publication are unique. I must be the only publisher in the world who knows when and where every book is sold; I have the name and address of every buyer of a WW book. Upon my acceptance of a typescript, an agreement form is sent to the writer. All copyright remains with the writer. Poetry appears in 350 copies; prose in 500. Ten per cent (35 copies of the poetry book, 50 of the prose) is given in lieu of royalty. The writer is also expected to make an advance purchase of 100 copies of his or her book, for sale or distribution as he or she pleases. Printing is done in Kolkata hand-operated presses, situated in the residences of their owners. The whole process is a cottage industry style low-key entrepreneurship, in the belief that small is not only beautiful but viable as well. Vanity and sponsored publishing? Yes, I am humanly vain about it and I do sponsor what I think is good writing. If any lover of literature will offer to subsidise, with no strings attached, striking new work by talented Indian poets, fiction-writers and belles-lettrists, please get in touch with me. The gesture will be acknowledged, appreciated, accepted, and implemented. Such Good Samaritan generosities, not market forces, are at the root of civilised and significant publishing the world over. The Pharisees are neatly bypassed.

[P. Lal passed away on 3 November 2010]